

Underground Economies: Infrastructure, Equity, and Access in Kansas City 1871-1939

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The first sewers were built in Kansas City in 1871 and, until around 1920, when the city began to gear up for the Ten-Year Plan, the city did not invest in any substantial way in the sewers and water systems. The Ten-Year Plan, a partnership between the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and the Pendergast political team, expanded Kansas City's waterworks and sewer system and drew money during the Depression toward the metropolitan city on the rocky bluffs. The Plan can help us understand the real impetus behind public works projects in Kansas City and the way in which these projects changed the social geographical distinctions in the city. The Plan, that Kansas City passed during the 1930s and that became a blueprint for the national New Deal.

I present the Ten-Year Plan as an example of a successful re-imagining of urban space in the first part of the twentieth-century. Not without its faults, the project extended basic services to those who badly needed them and sheltered Kansas Citians from the hard brunt of the national Great Depression. The plan re-imagined not only urban space and infrastructure, but also changed governmental decision-making and opened up public access to power by allowing Kansas City women, select leaders of the black community, and labor representatives to participate in a project that had real meaning for the entire Kansas City community. In this way, the Ten-Year Plan was truly unique and can serve as an example of flexible and open democratic governance. The Plan also helps us understand why environmental

infrastructure was established and improved, and for what ends.

Kansas City 1871-1920s

The first sewers in Kansas City were constructed in 1871. The well-known City Beautiful Movement had transformed Kansas City's suburban districts into lovely subdivisions with green spaces and single-family homes, equipped with toilets and water coverage yet in 1910, many of Kansas City's urban poor in the West Bottoms and the larger Northwest District were still without sewers and other basic sanitary services, let alone planned neighborhoods (Figure 1). I will argue that the Ten-Year Plan unknowingly participated in the correction and the institutionalization of some of these inequalities. Not for environmental reasons, but rather for personal profit and development during a time of great economic stress.

The Country Club Plaza, has long been an infamous example of racist housing policies put forward by urban governments in the early twentieth century. The deeds drawn up in the early part of the twentieth century lasted until the 1960s and restricted racial minorities from purchasing properties in the Country Club Plaza district. In the same period, Kansas City's parks and boulevard projects razed many neighborhoods that minorities, immigrants, and the working poor called home.¹ A 1911 report from the Kansas City Board of Public Welfare, heavily influenced by Jacob Riis' 1890 publication *How the Other Half Lives*, states that "boulevards have been pushed through parts of the city where there were formerly bad housing conditions."²

These “bad housing conditions” were most often in poor and working class communities and were underserved by city sewerage and water. The report exemplifies the relocation of one black family in Kansas City by contrasting a photograph of a mother with four of her children with a photograph of the same space after it had been razed for a boulevard (Figure 2).³

Displacement like Kansas City’s of the poor for the benefit of the infrastructure of the white and wealthy, especially boulevards and roads, happened in many major cities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Famously, it happened in the mid-twentieth century in New York City during Robert Moses’ controversial urban renewal project that resulted in the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, or BQE, and in Los Angeles to the Mexican-American community in the Chavez Ravine, razed to make space for Dodger’s Stadium. In this sense, Kansas City was an early variant of national efforts to “renew” urban spaces, often reinforcing and creating social dislocation and geographical segregation based on race and class. The picture of the family was likely taken in the first decade of the twentieth century, more than thirty years after Kansas City built its first sewers and roads, and illustrates the degree to which “development” was reserved for the white and wealthy.

Several images in the Annual Report from the Kansas City Board of Public Welfare illustrate the degree to which the poor residents of Kansas City were living without basic services. Many of the shanty-districts of Kansas City, Missouri were home to only one sewer vault connection and most commonly shared one privy vault as a toilet for several families. The Board of Public

Welfare reported that “It is not to the credit of Kansas City that we continue supine and tolerate the existence of more than 15,000 privies.” The report states that “actual inspection and tabulation force us to admit that...51.7 per cent of our contrivances for the disposal of human waste are of the kind which sanitary science pronounces an absolute menace to health.”⁴ In this era of Kansas City’s “progress,” the benefits of modern sanitation practices were reserved for less than half of Kansas City residents.

Engineers, city planners, and politicians in this period focused on the City Beautiful Movement, the birth of suburbanization, and beautiful parks and boulevards. The citizens in Kansas City who were excluded by suburbanization and wealth were also excluded from many basic sanitary services and were disproportionately poor and working class immigrants and minorities. Most of the time they were just underserved, but in some cases, the sewage pipes were literally funneling sewerage into their neighborhoods.

The engineers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not fully consider the health of the natural environment either and believed that the healthiest way to dispose of wastewater was to release it into rivers without treatment. Even during subsequent renovations, the effect of sewers and pollution on rivers was not a large topic of discussion, though it was now and then mentioned.⁵ Although there were always voices for sewage treatment, for almost a century the government was content with temporary and fleeting repairs. Why, when the negative effects of the water and sewer systems of Kansas City were clear to many, did the city so persistently neglect to update its sanitary system?

Until the 1930s, Kansas City governments focused primarily on aesthetic concerns, informed by the City Beautiful movement in Kansas City, and on suburban development [rather than on improving working class neighborhoods. The beautification of the area around the Blue River, for example, figured most prominently in the minds of the politicians who asked Kansas Citians for tax money to make improvements. The districts that would benefit directly from the work were meant to pay the proposed funds. This meant that districts that did not or could not pay, including poor districts, could not access services or expect improvements. Before 1930, despite widespread sewer failures and inadequacies, bonds intended for more expansive sewer construction did not pass.⁶ In such a time of neglect, the social geography of Kansas City—the lines of race and class--can be understood by looking at maps of sewer coverage.

Pendergast and the Ten-Year Plan

By 1930 the population of Kansas City was almost at 400,000 residents.⁷ The density and growth necessitated more sanitation and water development. Enter the Pendergast machine, a political juggernaut that ruled Kansas City for many years through the concentrated power of Boss “Tom” Pendergast. Although there was rampant corruption in the Pendergast machine, the machine also made important contributions made to the working-class community. The Pendergast family was more concerned than its predecessors, for whatever reason, with public service projects in Kansas City than the old pre-boss politics had been. In large part this concern came from selfish motives. Pendergast owned construction company, and he saw that he could make a profit through constructing

public works projects. This simple fact reveals something larger about the impetus behind public works projects in 20th century Kansas City.

The next phase of the development of Kansas City’s sewerage lies with the so-called “Ten-Year Plan,” passed by the public by a four-to-one margin in 1931. With a long history of voter fraud in Kansas City, and a political system run by “Boss Tom” Pendergast and his machine, the story of the Ten-Year Program is much more intriguing than it may seem at first glance. It is a story full of corruption, but also full of large Depression-era spending projects that put many men to work during a time of widespread unemployment and anticipated the Keynesian strategies of the national New Deal.⁸ The Ten-Year Plan thoroughly changed not only the economic landscape of Kansas City, but also its social geography, largely institutionalizing the separation between Kansas Citians of different classes and races.

The Ten-Year Plan, as writer Amalia Mallea explains, was a truly a coalition formed of unlikely allies, a “bipartisan campaign of hundreds of individuals and organizations that pushed for voter approval of a ‘unified plan’ for city building.”⁹ The Planning Committee was run by a “Pendergast-leaning” Republican and Chamber of Commerce President Conrad Mann, who established the “Committee of 1,000” to oversee the production and determine the areas of need that were affected by the final Ten-Year Plan.¹⁰ The Committee of 1,000 was said to include “all elements of the population and enlisted the best engineering, business and political minds to work out the details.”¹¹ The Committee did include several leaders of women’s organizations, along with business leaders from “nearly 100 civic, labor, and

business groups,” but did not include, as a matter of policy at least, any committee members of color or of low socio-economic status.¹²

In my research for this study, however, I did find a sheet of paper that listed thirteen members of the committee in red pencil and had “Negro” scrolled across the bottom. Of the thirteen, two representatives were women. These representatives included Chester Franklin of the *Kansas City Call*; Ida M. Becks of the Kansas City Urban League; L. Amasa Knox, Missouri’s first black man elected to represent Jackson County; Dr. William Thompkins, a well-known associate of Pendergast’s who later represented Kansas City as a recorder of deed for President Franklin Roosevelt in Washington D.C.; Thomas C. Unthank, founder of two private black hospitals in Kansas City; and Reverend D.A. Holmes of the large Vine Street Baptist Church, an outspoken critic of the Pendergast machine.¹³ This is certainly an impressive roster. Most of these representatives came from the Eighth Ward, an affluent black neighborhood, very different than the West Bottoms. In any case, though the Committee did not adequately include *all* aspects of the population, it was certainly more representative, and accessible, than previous development projects had been.¹⁴

City Manager Henry McElroy was all but appointed to his position as City Manager by Tom Pendergast in 1925. His involvement as one of three men organizing the committee and a man very involved in the project from beginning to end suggest that he represented machine interests in the Ten-Year Planning Committee meetings. The inclusion of representatives from organized labor suggests that Boss Tom’s dedication to the laboring community was influential in

the final make-up of the Committee of 1,000 and in the details of the final plan.

The Plan proved to be especially aware of the working- and lower-class neighborhoods in Kansas City. Most of the work done in association with the Ten-Year Plan “served districts in which reside persons of moderate or less than moderate means. Even before the depression, construction of these projects had been delayed by the inability of property owners to bear the burden of special assessments.”¹⁵ This attention to the working-class and poor neighborhoods of Kansas City seems to line up with Pendergast’s philosophy of leadership that explicitly privileged “consideration [of working class] troubles...paving, a water main,” etc,” and one can guess that this kind of attention was being encouraged and facilitated by Pendergast and McElroy.¹⁶ Additionally, the final plan stipulated that “so far as possible without sacrifice to the interests of the citizens at large, Kansas City engineers and architects will be employed and contracts for improvements will be let to Kansas City institutions.”¹⁷ This policy was a major victory for Kansas City laborers who, due to the passage of the Plan, would be employed throughout the Depression at a level not seen in other metropolitan areas around the United States. At its peak, this landmark reform employed about 16,500 workers and expanded sewer and water coverage to many new neighborhoods.

The projects introduced under Boss Tom helped avoid massive and widespread unemployment in Kansas City during the Great Depression. This fact makes Pendergast a more complicated figure to understand, for his machine did profit from widespread corruption and voter fraud, but also attended to the needs of working class citizens, handling

“all sorts of individual and neighborhood concerns--everything from expediting garbage collection to the filling of troublesome potholes.”¹⁸

Pendergast’s team used their experience with elections to make sure that the bond issue passed muster with the public. One historian states that Pendergast’s machine played a much larger role than was officially recorded in the planning process, and “machine workers made sure the proposal passed by a four-to-one margin, far more than the required two-thirds vote.”¹⁹ In the official history of the Ten-Year Plan published in 1938 by the Chamber of Commerce, *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet*, Pendergast is not mentioned at all. On top of the enormous voting strength the machine had at its disposal because of the favors and friendships developed by the wards and precinct captains, the mere employment roster of the City Manager Emergency Fund endowed any machine-sponsored vote with enormous strength.²⁰

Of course, the “city projects generated abundant business for Pendergast companies, especially” his Ready-Mixed Concrete Company.²¹ Another author adds that “the Ten-Year Bond campaign which reached a successful climax in the summer of 1931, midway between the political campaigns of 1930 and 1932 that established Pendergast’s position as the boss of Kansas City and the political power in the state.”²²

The Ten-Year Plan became a blueprint for the national New Deal, and helped Kansas City avoid the worst of the Great Depression. The Pendergast

machine and the Ten-Year Plan were among the first to provide equal access to sanitation services in the late 1920s and 1930s. This is not to claim that the boss system effectively addressed all the issues of environmental degradation or path dependence. The original system that was expanded under the Plan was deeply flawed in environmental terms and disposed of wastewater, untreated, into the Missouri River. The Ten-Year Plan did not correct the flaws of the original system, but the old corrupt political machine did succeed in ending a long period of sanitation neglect among the poor neighborhoods of the city.

In 1931 the Pendergast political machine (City Manager McElroy and Judge Harry S. Truman, both loyal to Boss Tom), along with the Chamber of Commerce, succeeded in pushing a large reform package through the city’s bond process and combined these funds with monies from the federal government in order to initiate a new phase of major infrastructure development. They had the support of the Chamber of Commerce , loaded with Pendergast’s political partners, a support that suggests how deeply powerful the machine was. The machine, through its Ten Year Plan, made possible widespread employment in a time of great economic stress, extended public services to those who badly needed them, and put Kansas City on the national map as a city that used its Keynesian economic policy to better the lives of its citizens in a concrete way. It appears that despite corrupt economic monopoly and nepotism, the Pendergast political machine some positive democratic and environmental effects.



Figure 1.

This panorama is a bird's eye view of the West Bottoms area. The picture shows the Stockyards, the railways, the factories, and their interaction with the neighborhood. One can see the Kaw River in the background, while the Missouri River features in the front of the drawing.²³



Figure 2.²⁴

Endnotes

¹ Kansas City, Missouri Board of Public Welfare. *Second Annual Report*. Kansas City, Missouri: Fratcher Publishing, 1911. Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City (hereafter WHMC—KC).

² Kansas City Board of Public Welfare. *Second Annual Report*, 22. WHMC—KC.

³ Kansas City Board of Public Welfare. *Second Annual Report*, 23. WHMC—KC. See also Figure 1.

⁴ Kansas City Board of Public Welfare. *Second Annual Report*, 35-38. WHMC—KC.

⁵ *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 147.

⁶ Mallea, Amahia. "Rivers Running Through," 120.

⁷ *K.C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri*, 183.

⁸ *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 191.

⁹ Mallea, Amahia. "Rivers Running Through," 135.

¹⁰ Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 88-89.

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- ¹¹ Reddig, *Tom's Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend*, 181.
- ¹² *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 95.
- ¹³ Coulter, Charles E. "Take Up The Black Man's Burden:" *Kansas City's African American Communities 1865-1939*. Almost all of the thirteen names listed on the Committee of 1,000 memo are discussed at length in Coulter's history, although they are not mentioned as representatives on this particular committee, and were all exceptionally devoted activists for Kansas City's black community throughout their lives.
- ¹⁴ Pendergast's administration was similarly ambiguous on the issue of racial integration and inclusion. In some ways, Pendergast helped institutionalize racial segregation in Kansas City. In others, he supported the African American community by helping to put "Kansas City's African Americans in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt camp long before most other urban areas." See Coulter, Charles E. "Take Up The Black Man's Burden:" *Kansas City's African American Communities 1865-1939*, 115.
- ¹⁵ *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 202.
- ¹⁶ Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 72.
- ¹⁷ *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 162.
- ¹⁸ Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 94.
- ¹⁹ Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 88-89.
- ²⁰ Fisher, Paul. "Built on Greed." *Kansas City Star*, 21 May 1939.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Reddig, *Tom's Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend*, 180.
- ²³ Koch, Augustus. *Map of the West Bottoms area of Kansas City, Missouri*. Printed by the Reid Brothers Packing Company in 1895. Accessed on <http://www.worldmapsonline.com/historicalmaps/1W-MO-KC-1895.htm>.
- ²⁴ Kansas City Board of Public Welfare. *Second Annual Report*, 22. WHMC—KC.